

Breaking Rules

A few days after submitting my August column on the problems associated with letting the cue ball land too close to a short rail, I received an email from George Fels directing my attention to an important departure from my simple rule for avoiding trouble. In his short but informative note, Fels pointed out that Mike Sigel's favorite secondary break shots in straight pool *require* leaving the cue ball closest to the foot rail in order to break up what's left of the stack from behind. Instead of pointing out that I still stand by my rule's value or that my original discussion allows for certain exceptions, I'll skip right to a full discussion of this powerful tactic of Mike Sigel's that had previously escaped my awareness.

According to Fels, Sigel's favorite way to spread what's left of a straight-pool rack after the initial break shot is with a shot from behind the rack. His rationale for that method of attack is that doing so moves balls toward the center of the table where they are less likely to form new clusters. After investigating the Sigel approach it became immediately apparent that, even though I had never preferred breaking the rack from behind, doing so fits nicely with several of my own rules for taking off a rack. So, while I had possessed key pieces, I had somehow managed to go for years without the completed puzzle.

No game challenges a broader range of our skills or confronts us with more possibilities than straight pool, two facts that defy short discussion or simplification. However, even though things can't always work out the way we want, I do have a favored progression through an open rack. I like to begin with balls behind the rack and on the side rails, then move down table for any balls that got past the side pockets before returning to the business end of the table to finish up. Ideally, my last few shots are with balls out in the open between the side pockets and the foot string as I gain position for a break shot. Most experienced players prefer to finish a rack in the center area for two main reasons. One, that's the best place for easy position on break shots next to the rack. And two, balls out in the center area generally go into all six pockets, a feature that facilitates completing the rack, even after falling slightly out of position during the crucial last shots.

Look at the layout in Diagram 1. With an easy shot on the 1 ball that naturally moves the cue ball toward the table's center, many players would take that shot and leave the cue ball near the X for a secondary break shot with the 7 ball. Though we cannot definitively condemn that choice we must see its potential problem. While that kind of position would certainly lead to breaking up the remaining balls, the side impact would also push balls toward the side rail where that 10 ball sits waiting for the 14 and 2 to join it in the formation of another cluster. A top priority in straight pool is to separate balls, but all too often, we hinder our own progress by herding object balls into new groups.

A much better option from this position is to follow the Sigel method and lead off with the 12 ball. The biggest danger with break shots from behind the rack is a strong chance of winding up stuck behind everything and safe. With this shot on the 12 ball it's easy to envision the cue ball sliding off the side of the 3 and attaching itself to the 5. For that reason, it's always a good idea to save a ball near one of the foot corners as a safety valve when planning to hit the rack from behind. Here, the 1 ball serves that purpose nicely.

Diagram 2 shows a likely outcome after the shot on the 12 ball. As noted, the 1 ball will come in handy and would be a lifesaver had the 3 ball made its way to the side rail. There are a few other things worth mentioning. The balls are now spread well enough so that every one can be pocketed without another breakout. A knowledgeable player would recognize that detail and go to work on this layout without moving another object ball. We also see that the 7 ball remains where it was while the 2 got pushed a few inches to other side of the rack making those two balls ideal break-shot candidates. Also, the impact from behind the rack did not push anything to a rail. Instead, we see that the force from under the rack moved three balls, the 13, 11 and 4, out into the center area. As they lie, two of them will go into all six pockets after everything but the break shot is cleared. At that point the 11 ball will go into five pockets. Any one of those three balls in the center offers easy position for the break shot along with lots of options for the last few shots of the rack, the big payoff from shooting the 12 ball.

Although I've always preferred finishing a rack of straight pool with balls in the table's center area, I never realized how much control I hold over getting a few there. So, as much as I like my rule for avoiding trouble by keeping the cue ball away from the short rails, I now see the benefits of breaking it occasionally. Maybe it's not rules that should guide us but their wise exceptions.

